

Prayer

The glory of Your world, Lord God, is beyond our comprehension. For within it we find love that changes darkness to light, we find joy which triumphs over disaster, and we find hope in the midst of trial and distress. Surely You are there within Your creation, and there for all to see Your glory. Praise You, Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the World. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire services

All emergency services have plans for major incidents, such as flood and fire. Pray for those who make these plans, and for godly wisdom to be used for the good of all

On-going prayers

- *Pray about population growth and the moral issues it raises*
- *Give thanks for new life, and God's gift of children to parents*
- *Pray about Pakistan and its internal war against the Taleban*

Meditation

Often, when tired and blinded by pressures,
Strength fades and confidence fails,
Sapping frail spiritual reserves we lean upon.

Too quickly, we question the promises of God
When trying to resolve besetting problems
That seize us on the path we think is right.

In truth, we turn from guidance we are given,
Not knowing that the Father-heart of God, in love,
Can never let us go: we let Him go ourselves.

Jesus ... Hold us firmly, do not let us fall,
Show us paths we cannot see.
Hold us carefully, protect our souls
Calm our nerves if touched by fear.
Speak the truth to each directly
When we need a wiser counsel ...

For this is how we practice true discipleship,
When in distress, we trust our all to You, whose love
Is greater than the enemies we meet upon the way.

Bible Study - Matthew 14:22-27

²² *At once, Jesus insisted that the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side, while He sent the crowds away.* ²³ *After He sent the crowds away, He went into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.*

²⁴ *Meanwhile, the boat was some distance from the land, battered by waves because of a strong head wind.* ²⁵ *In the fourth watch of the night, Jesus came*

toward them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified; 'It is a ghost!' they said, and shouted out with fear. ²⁷ However, Jesus immediately spoke to them and said, 'Courage, it is I! Don't be afraid.'

Review

This remarkable passage is the famous story of Jesus' walking on the water. Over the years, many people have attempted to try and explain this incident, and all kinds of reasons have been suggested to explain how it could have been done. However, we can only begin with the story as we have it here in Matthew's Gospel, which at this point is full of miracles, and all of them point towards the divine power and authority of Jesus. In each story in this part of the Gospel, Matthew records the way the disciples came to terms with who Jesus was, and in this incident, they were faced with Jesus' extraordinary and divine command of some impossible circumstances. The whole Gospel focuses eventually on the evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, and the gradual steps taken by the disciples, especially Peter, towards putting what they thought about Jesus into words.

You may wonder why I have separated this story from what comes next, which is Peter's attempt to walk to Jesus on the water. I have done this because what Jesus did is important in itself, quite apart from the issue of Peter's response. This is confirmed by the other Gospels that record the story (Mark 6:45-52 and John 6:15-21); they describe Jesus walking on the water but not Peter's attempt to do the same. This suggests that there is indeed a good reason to have a good look at why Jesus walked on the water in the first place, and this is what this study does now.

The story begins with Jesus seeking to gain some time by himself after the exhausting schedule of ministry that he had endured. The previous events present a seriously congested period of ministry for Jesus; teaching to the crowds in parables from a boat (in Matthew 13), learning about the death of John the Baptist (14:1-12) and then seeking to leave, only to be pursued by five thousand people he subsequently needed to help, and then feed (14:13-21)! Nevertheless, Jesus used the time to make distinctions between what He did for the crowds and what He did for the disciples, and it becomes increasingly clear that He wanted quality time with the disciples (13:16,51f.), and for that, he needed to get them away from the crowd. It certainly seems that the arrangements Jesus made at the beginning of our passage were designed to separate the two; but before anything further happened, Jesus needed to go aside by Himself to pray (14:23).

Much is made of Jesus' habit of spending time by himself in prayer, but Matthew only refers to this here. It is Luke who observes that Jesus did this 'often' (Luke 5:16). There is great symbolism present in most of this story, and we do not always see it because we are not as well versed in the Old Testament as those who first knew Jesus; but the characteristic of being alone with God was associated with Moses. However, Jesus was not simply a new Moses, who was at his peak instructing the seas to part at God's command (Exodus 14). By contrast, Jesus came down from the hillside to rejoin His disciples by walking calmly over a raging storm to help them!

Jesus' walking on the water came in the early morning (the fourth watch of the night – 14:25) after the disciples had spent a whole night rowing through a storm. It is likely they were exhausted and in great fear, the storm had prevented them from rowing across the lake, and kept them out all night in miserable conditions. The sight of Jesus walking towards them in the half light of the morning was indeed scary! The disciples had been in a storm previously and discovered that Jesus was in command of the 'wind and the waves' (8:23-27), but now they were faced with the sight of Jesus coming to help them in the midst of a situation they should have been able to deal with by themselves, and they thought he

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you experienced times when it seems as if Jesus has 'sent you away' so that He might 'reveal Himself' to you again in new and powerful ways?
2. Given all that has been going on in the stories of Matthew, what do you think Jesus was praying about in verse 23?
3. What theories have you heard to try and explain Jesus' walking on the water? How do you rate these stories?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The challenge is to continue to accept what God does for us whatever it may be, and in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. We often find that we are in the midst of battling with evil, but we should expect the Lord to appear, and help us. He will! There are many occasions when the Lord has revealed Himself to me very powerfully in ways that I did not expect and at times that were odd. This, of course, is the stuff of testimonies, and these are of vital importance in the life of the church.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Over the course of a week, actively expect the Lord to do miraculous things in your life! It sounds a strange request, but unless we practice expecting great things to happen, we might miss them when they do!*
- *If you have had any miraculous events happen in your life, write them down, as a short story. When you have done this, show it to someone else and see whether this is something you should publish for others to read.*

Final Prayer

Jesus, the very fact that we can talk to You is a miracle of Your grace. Thank You for being big enough to hear all our prayers, and thank You for caring for each of us individually. It is beyond our understanding, and Your love is very real! Thank You, Lord Jesus; AMEN

was a 'ghost' (14:26)! Jesus' words of reassurance were designed to encourage them to trust Him in all circumstances, and this is how we should interpret them for ourselves, today.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Jesus at prayer, compared to Moses
- The details of the story and the miracle
- Jesus and the disciples, and the reason for the miracle
- The miraculous sign of the Messiah

Notes on the text and translation

V23 *'After He sent the crowds away'* The phrase is repeated from the end of the previous verse, as if emphasising the dismissal of the crowd.

V24 *'the boat was some distance from the land'* The Greek says that the boat was 'many stadia' from shore. This is an old measure of distance, probably about 185 meters or 600 feet. The distance was considerable therefore, perhaps half a mile or a mile off land.

V27 *'it is I'* This is undoubtedly the translation, though the Greek words 'ego eimi' also mean 'I AM' which is one translation of the sacred name 'JHWH' in the Old Testament Hebrew. These words could well have had greater meaning for the disciples than just self identification!

Going Deeper

Jesus at prayer, compared to Moses

Jesus needed to model prayer to the disciples, and he did this in two ways, firstly by telling them how to pray (Matthew 6:9f.), and secondly by demonstrating personally that it was a priority. For Jesus, there was a greater priority for prayer at this time than there was at any other time, possibly until He faced His death in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was faced with pressing crowds, with the Pharisees trying to kill Him (12:14), the need to move on from apparent success in Galilee and go to Jerusalem, and the need for Him to teach the disciples about why He was going there. Jesus needed to pray because He was most hard pressed, and the same is true for us!

If there are parallels with Moses in this story, they begin with Jesus being alone with God on a mountain or hillside. The expression 'into the hills' is similar to one of the phrases used to refer to Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, as used in the 'Septuagint', the Greek version of the Old Testament available in Jesus' day. Water is certainly an important theme in the stories of Jesus, and although we do not easily spot the connection between the parting of the Red Sea and what happens here, in the minds those who saw it Jesus' calmness in walking over water was superior to Moses' mere obedience to God. What happened showed Jesus was 'greater' than Moses

The details of the story and the 'miracle'

Verse 22 is emphatic. Jesus told the disciples to go away in no uncertain terms, and this can only be explained by His desire to separate the disciples from the crowd. We have already noted that Jesus wanted to get the disciples by themselves so that He could teach them, but in the feeding of the five thousand, they had ended up managing the crowds again, as they had before their commission to mission (Matthew 10f.). The circumstances were not optimal, but Jesus' actions were driven by what was right for the Kingdom.

It is often forgotten that the occasion when Jesus walked on the water was during a difficult storm, just like the earlier story of Jesus and the disciples at sea (8:23f.). Quaint so-called 'explanations' of this miracle suggest, amongst other things, that Jesus was walking on some secretly known path of rocks or corals, or even along the shoreline. Such ideas come from those who have not read the story, or are profoundly naïve. The boat was clearly a considerable distance from the shore (the Greek word – see noted above clearly demonstrates this), and the whole event happened in the midst of the chaos of a great storm at sea. In these circumstances, trying to trick people into believing you were walking on water would be fanciful! It really does not help our attempts to find out what Matthew is telling us about Jesus if we try to dismantle a story of Matthew's that is an important part of the wider story of the disciple's growth in faith. What we do know in verse 26 is that the disciples believed they had seen a ghost. In the terrifying circumstances in which they found themselves, they were not so much fascinated by a miracle but fearful of losing their sanity in a desperate situation!

The disciples sighting was further complicated by the time of day. Verse 25 indicates by the Roman system of night watches that it was between 3.00 and 6.00 am, and towards the end of this time it was possibly that the light of morning was beginning to lighten the sky. All of us know well that light can play tricks with our eyes when it is changing, and dawn comes up relatively quickly in that part of the world. It is no wonder that the disciples thought they had seen a ghost (14:26)! In the half light of breaking dawn, Jesus frightened them, and were only calmed by the sound of His voice above the noise of the storm, saying; 'courage, it is I! Don't be afraid.'

Jesus and the disciples, and the reason for the miracle

It seems that Jesus wanted to teach the disciples some personal truths about faith, and to reveal more about Himself to them. The task was essential for the success of His own mission, given Him by the Father. The last time the disciples had been together in a boat in a storm, Jesus had been present. The storm had been too much for the disciples and they were perturbed by the fact that Jesus remained asleep in the boat while they struggled for their lives (8:23-27). This was the first occasion when Jesus used his sovereign power to control the forces of nature, and in that way deliver the disciples from danger. On that occasion, the disciples had been astounded at Jesus power and authority, but as far as Jesus was concerned, they simply showed 'little faith' (8:26). Now, whilst they were in the boat without Jesus, they would have loved to have Him there to do the same; but this was not Jesus' way. They needed to continue to do what Jesus had told them, which was to row in a certain direction, even though it was hard; but then Jesus was miraculously there, not with them but at a distance!

Jesus did not wish to repeat Himself or go over what He had already taught the disciples. He came to them across the water in order to demonstrate not simply His power and authority. Jesus had demonstrated signs and wonders for others, and the disciples had seen all kinds of miracles, but this time, He performed a miraculous sign just for them, to address their own fears and doubts, and challenge them further about their faith. In so doing, He appealed to a deeper faith within the disciples than the 'little faith' found in them previously (8:23-27, see v26). The disciples were still fearful, even the hardened sailors, familiar with storms and the tricks of the water on the Sea of Galilee. They needed another revelation of the power of the One to whom they had committed themselves, one that encouraged them to persist in the face of difficult odds.

The miraculous sign of the Messiah

When Jesus spoke to the disciples, He did so with some words that are difficult to convey in English. If you read the translation notes above, you will discover that the words 'it is I'

(14:27) are two words in Greek that are normally used to translate the great name of God 'JHWH' of the Old Testament. This name was revealed to Abraham (Gen 15:1, 17:1) and Moses (Ex 3:14,15), and they are often translated in English by the expression 'I Am'. These words are God's special self-revelation within Scripture, which we know from John's record of the great 'I Am' sayings of Jesus (e.g 'I Am the good Shepherd ...' – John 10:11,14, and many more similar saying in John). I was tempted to translate this phrase here in our passage 'I am here', but this would not be entirely correct. Perhaps the most accurate translation would be 'Courage, I Am, do not fear!', except that this would mean something to someone who knew the Old Testament well, but not someone without this particular knowledge. So I have kept the usual translation.

The words 'I Am' lie behind the holy Name of God and strict Jews did not pronounce them because of their holiness. Here, however, Jesus used them freely to identify Himself to His panic stricken followers! There is no question but that Jesus was saying to the disciples not simply 'I am here to help you as before'; but 'you have no need to fear because "I Am" your Messiah and your God, and I am in control'. As Jesus spoke these words, He drew the disciples' attention away from themselves to Himself. Then the storm did not exactly cease, but the storm ceased to be the issue, and therefore ceased to be an object of fear (as we will see tomorrow). We do not hear any more of the storm or even the state of the sea, at least until Peter attempted to walk on the water (see tomorrow's study!). Perhaps the miracle here is that the presence of Jesus removes fear.

Application

There are a number of applications that arise within this text, but the main one is surely that faith requires us to see Jesus present with us in the midst of the most difficult of circumstances. This comes out surprisingly in one other aspect of the story we have not yet considered in depth.

Within the Old Testament, salvation is often described as coming from or through the sea, for example, Exodus 14; Psalms 77:19, 107:26-28, 65:7, 89:9,10; Job 26:11,12; Jonah 2. The theme was ingrained within the Jewish religious 'psyche' and celebrated in part within the great Passover celebrations. The sea was also thought of by most Jewish people as a place of trouble, or even evil, and it certainly bore that symbolic significance throughout much of the Old Testament. We may or may not be people who have anything to do with the sea, but this ancient symbolism allows us to identify with this story, because Jesus came to help His disciples fight their fear of evil.

It can certainly appear to us that evil situations arise, and we feel that Jesus has led us into them, just as the disciples who were told by Jesus to travel by boat that night, and found themselves facing a fierce storm. As we battle with that evil, then Jesus will appear, maybe not as we expect, and perhaps even miraculously; it may even be difficult to spot him (as in the gloom of the morning light and the storm), but He is there with authority. When we focus upon him when He calls, then the evil storms around us may not subside, but come under His authority. Through our faith, He saves us.

It does seem incredible that Jesus reveals Himself to us most fully in the midst of times of trouble; yet this is the experience of countless people, and it was true of the disciples in our passage of scripture today. Jesus revealed Himself in power and authority to the disciples as both Messiah and God, because He wished to do something for them, to teach them and develop their faith. It is most likely that when the Lord reveals Himself powerfully to us in the middle of a great test of faith, He may wish to teach us something, as well.